

Fortnightly Sermon

By

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WHAT IS RELIGION?

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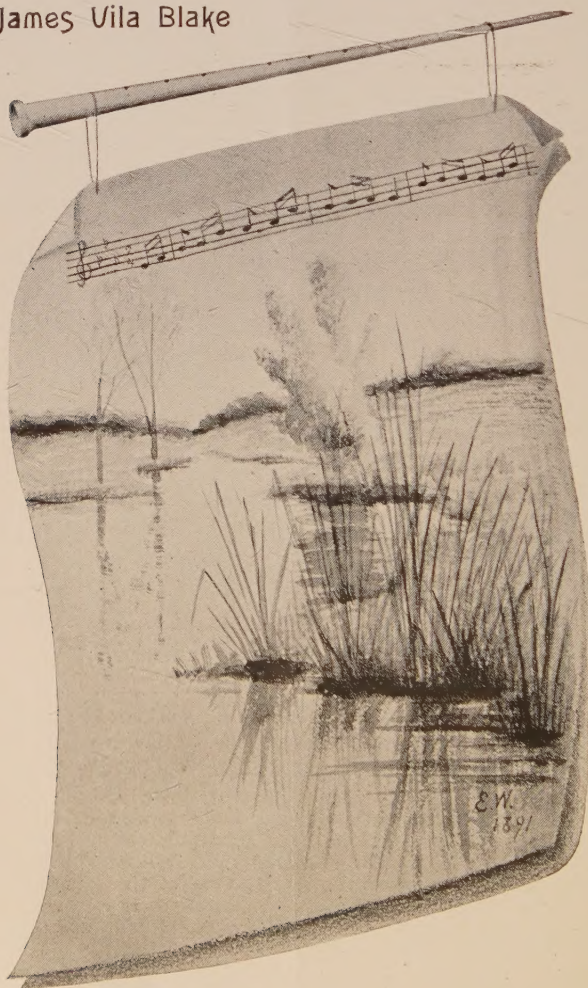
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Mr. Blake's sermons are not more distinct from others by their style than by their quality. And what is most conspicuous in this is something brooding, meditative, of which, among ourselves since Channing's day, we have had very little. How can we have it, when we are so busy and so hurried and so anxious all the time? The habit of meditation is almost impossible for the working minister of our times. But Mr. Blake has it to perfection. Somehow, he has made an island for himself amid the whelming sea. What we have in consequence is very strange and very beautiful. . . . One of the remarkable things in these sermons is the union of freedom and boldness with reverence. . . . Another remarkable thing is the union of much careful reading—in prose and poetry apart from beaten tracks—with much homely observation of outward things and of men's lives. . . . And still another remarkable thing is the breadth of Mr. Blake's studious activities. Literature and science, criticism, comparative religion, poetry and music,—all have brought their glory and honor into his mind; and nothing has remained there crude and undigested, but of everything there has been a wonderful assimilation.—*Christian Register*.

St. Solifer

WITH OTHER WORTHIES
AND UNWORTHIES

By James Vila Blake



WHAT IS RELIGION?

An apostle says it is to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction and to keep oneself unspotted from the world." In this passage from the epistle of James, religion is a practical interest in the market, the court, the street, daily goodness, worthiness of life. Luther thought religion to be salvation by faith. He detested the epistle of James, and called it, as is well known, an epistle of straw, "*straminea epistola*." The great reformer is not the first man, nor the last, who, while professing to found on sacred writ, has disposed thus easily of whatever tried his theological patience. But is Luther right? or is James right? or who is right among the many diverse thinkers on religion? What is religion? At least it seems a reality, which sometimes sweeps over our souls, filling us with a strange light and feeling of life, joy, peace. Is it a high, pure morality, as James and many others say? Is it faith in some means of grace and salvation, as Luther and many others declare? Is it sacrifice, or prayer, or worship of God, as still others tell us? Is it devotion and striving unto the truth, as some would have it? or, as I have heard it defined, "an aspiration toward *the ideal*?"

Here is a strange thing! Yet the fact meets us in many things every day! We all speak about religion, truly we feel it, we build churches for it, we come together in them to seek its inspiration. Yet if we ask what religion is, no one can define it or tell what it is.

First, let us ask, Is religion a form? or practice of a form? or any kind of observance? In reply, Whether is the outward act the more important, or the inward state, feeling, experience which impels to the act? Ought not the inward condition to be named religion? Form is but expression. Not the mode of expression, but what is expressed, not the language but the

meaning, is essential. Besides, form is the variable element. The same feeling or thought may be expressed in many ways. Religious forms vary as languages do. Refined and barbarous tongues thrill equally with human love, joy and woe. If, therefore, form be religion,—what form? And why any one form? For all convey the tremblings of the same spirit. They utter in different speech the universal prayer. And if there be no form, no constant uniformity of expression, nay, if there be no expression at all, and silence hang as a veil before this holy of holies, the religious experience of the soul,—what matter? Doth a man not love because he proclaims it not on the house-tops? Is religion naught if it hide in the heart and commune with God unspeaking? Plainly religion is not form or forms. It is that inward reality, whatever it be, which may take all forms or none. It makes its own fit expression at need. It lives tranquilly also in a sacred silence.

But if religion be something inward, resident in the spirit, shall we have recourse to belief? Is religion belief of certain doctrine or doctrines? Is it assent to a statement or creed?

But opposing doctrines have been held with equal fervor and self-sacrifice. Martyrs prove not truth. Men have perished by sword and flame for Judaism, Mohammedanism, Unitarianism, as readily and firmly as for the great church and its orthodoxy. The Romanist shows a long and cherished list of martyrs; but Roman persecution has enriched all communions with sacrifices no less glorious. It seems then hard to tell, if religion be a belief in doctrines, *what* doctrines constitute religion. For *all* have the witness of human devotion unto death. Between doctrines so hallowed, will you decide which is religion? Shall I decide? Shall there be an authority to decree? Then religion is but repetition, recitation, profession without personal answerableness. Besides, shall we say all those ages and peoples were void of religion which had not that authority and its decrees? Shall, then, each man decide for himself? But we are fallible beings. The most earnest mind may err. Therefore surely the spirit is to be considered more than the result, and an honest mistake surely can not be irreligious or unreligious.

So then, doctrines and forms seem no more than the gar-

ments of religion. If still we ask what true religion is, we must go deeply to the inward and unutterable, to facts of the spirit more sacred and essential than any belief whatever.

Let us ask, then, What this still deeper reality of the spirit is? this that creates forms and empowers belief. For this that underlies all the many expressions of religion, surely must be a pure and simple religiousness.

Religion, in common experience everywhere, is at least so much as this,—a going forth of the spirit in devout feelings and adorations. It is homage, devotion, veneration, awe. So much, I say, it is at least. Whatever more religion may be, at least it is this. It takes many forms. It invests many different things, with sanctity; at last all things, by its fulness of beauty and power. But underneath all the changing ways and forms of men, amid all the harsh struggle of the creeds, religion lies the self-same in every religious heart,—hope, trust, adoration. This may turn aside to ugly forms, wretched objects, harsh creeds; but itself abides essentially indestructible, undefiled. I mean not that bad forms and worse creeds impede not this inner adoration. They do hinder it. I deem the harm done by the doctrine of salvation by blood-atonement to pure religious adoration, very great. But I say, that such a doctrine, and others worse, *corrupt* not the adoring spirit at its depths. They may hinder and clog it,—no more. It is like flame which, however feeble or smoke-mingled, still is flame, pure and incorruptible.

What now calls forth a pure and perfect adoration? What does the good spirit,—or the spirit in its undefiled deeps—adore, venerate, love and worship? Only Holiness, Truth, and Loveliness,—“The Good, the Beautiful and the True.” It is purely religious to believe in these, to be filled with love and veneration for them. The spirit, in the springs of its worship, is undefiled. It aspires, therefore, to the Infinitely Good. It adores at last the undefiled, like itself. Perfect Holiness, Pure Truth, Divine Beauty, these it worships. Before these it bows down, kneels, fears, loves. It veils not its eyes, nor abases itself. Not such its way of worship—though with awe. For only in adoration of the Perfect Beauty, and Goodness, does it know its own undefiled being.

But now it is asked, If religion be adoration of Beauty and Holiness, what is morality? Morality, surely, is no more outward than religion. Morality is not a good act. It is the *goodness* of the act. Men differ about the justice and righteousness of many things. Good men differ sincerely and uprightly. Therefore morality resides in the inward state, in pure motive and conscientiousness, in devotion to the true and the good. How then distinguished from religion? Yet, surely, they are not the same. We never use the words indifferently.

The question is just. Religion and morality mean not the same, though they can not part and live in their grandeurs. Let us make the difference clear.

Man, as he grows in soul, is placed in two different relations with Beauty and Goodness. In one relation he scans his own soul. Beauty and Goodness then appear to him as ideal qualities which it is the business of the soul to make real, in itself. He finds himself imperfect, selfish, passionate, unkind, untrue, unearnest. But from the center of him, the spring of life pure and undefiled, grows the command, "These things thou shalt not be; lo! here in thy very life and essence, thou art written down Beautiful and Holy. Follow thine own real nature. The Good, the Beautiful, the True, are the image of what thou art by nature here where thou canst not be defiled, and the image of what thou shalt be in very deed and truth, by sanctified will and holy devotion." Morality, therefore, views the Good and Beautiful as *unrealized* and *to be realized*. It aspires to them as to the end of being. It contemplates them as its ideal, the high image shrined within of what it is not, but ought to be, and shall be.

But again, man looks forth abroad over the wide creation, and into his own spirit, no longer as a solitude of moral obligations. He contemplates all before him as part of one mighty whole. Then the Good, the Beautiful and the True shine out with real light. No longer hoped for only, they are found. What his devotion burned to, as the aim, destiny, ideal, of his being, now he adores as the present and perfect nature of all being. Holiness surrounds him. He lives in the righteous Unity. Beauty, Truth, Goodness, Love, all that is pure and lovely, Divine, Infinitely Beautiful, shines everywhere, flows in

the streams, rivers and rains, follows the starry paths of the sky, flies with the invisible winds, and lights the earth with divine radiance from saint and prophet, "mother and child." Then the soul comes forth in pure and supreme adoration of this Holy Being. This adoration is Religion.

Religion and Ethics have the same root, namely, the distinction between Good and Evil; Right and Wrong. This is involved in saying that each is fundamentally a mental attitude toward the Good, the Beautiful and the True.

But they differ in the attitude.

Religion adores the Good, the Beautiful and the True as *Being*, Infinitely Manifest and Eternal, and the *Source of us*.

Ethics bows to the Good, the Beautiful and the True, not as now *Being*, but as an ideality to be made to be by us.

Religion is that inward experience which binds us back to our Source, and is Emotion, Awe, Love, Adoration, Devotion.

Morality is that inward sanction which commands us to live unto our natural ideal, end and aim, and is a Principle—obligation, self-requirement, self-answerableness.

And Religion must be suffused with the Ethical Principle of Righteousness.

And Morality must be suffused with the Religious Emotion—Reverence, the Sense of the Awfulness of the OUGHT, and of its unity with all life.

But can they be parted and live? I think in their low forms they can; in their exalted, complete forms, not. But religion is at once the more spiritual, fecund, creative,—and dependent. It has the seeds of all life in it. Yet Ethics can grow better without Religion than Religion without Ethics. This would seem to follow from their nature, as I have stated it. For the initial impulse of Religion is the sentiment which *binds us back to our Source*. In the beginning I suppose that sentiment is fear—mainly at least, perhaps wholly. It is only in its fulness and glory that religion adores our Source as the Good, the Beautiful and the True. But it is in these thoughts that Ethics has its root. Therefore Ethics begins with a substance which Religion must grow to. But whether Religion must grow to it before Ethics can begin with it, may be a question. Or whether Religion and Ethics grow together and feed each other, from the

beginning. I like not to divide man into parts or faculties, and say, this part did so, or this other part so; for the whole man acts in all. Yet, also, one form of growth may forerun another. But this seems certain, that Ethics can attain a greater nobility and purity among persons disowning Religion, than Religion can attain among persons disowning Ethics or heedless of it.

I return, now, once more to my simple statement of Religion and Morality:

Morality is devotion to Beauty, Truth and Holiness as to be realized in us and by us; Religion is adoration of Beauty, Truth and Holiness as realized and radiant in Being.

"Its altars are the mountains and the ocean,
Earth, air, stars, all that springs from the Great Whole,
Who hath produced, and will receive the soul."

But now I shall be reminded that I have not spoken of God, the Father. "Do you mean to say that one who will not name God may be religious?" Yes, I think so. I mean to say so. He that can not utter the Great and Holy Name is one whose idea of the Being which is Holy and Beautiful differs from yours and mine. But if still he reverence and love the resident Beauty and Goodness, why shall he not be called religious? His heart may be thrilled by the light, the day, the night, the sweet earth, the opening flower, the innocence of childhood, the venerableness of age. Is not that religious, devout? If such a one be called irreligious or unreligious, I will leave the sentence to Him who sees and knows the heart, which I can not see. Yet I would rather be such than many a so-called believer. Do you remember the picture the poet draws of the dreadful man of faith?—

"A man austere,
The instinct of whose nature was to kill;
The wrath of God he preached from year to year,
And read, with fervor, Edwards on the Will;
His favorite pastime was to slay the deer
In summer on some Adirondac Hill;
E'en now, while walking down the rural lane,
He lopped the way-side lilies with his cane."

Have you never known a man who could not see the living spirit of God, and frankly said so, yet touched with speechless veneration and tender care the brittle fern leaf, would not break or bruise the sighing reed, looked with solemn reverence

on every creeping thing whose life he could not make and would not destroy, gazed with strange rapture into the unknown depths of an animal's eye, and felt his own fill with tears at the beauty of the earth's green and gold on hill and plain? Which of the two, think you, is the more religious man? He who lopped the lily ruthlessly, because therewith he spoke a name for the maker of the lily? Nay, rather than so, I would speak no name. Surely I should be loved and not judged harshly, nor misjudged by Him who cares not for names but sees the thoughts of the heart, and everywhere is the Living Spirit who "out of his own beauty maketh all things fair."

NOTE—Regarding the last paragraph of this sermon I will add the following:

I agree thankfully with those who say that the thought of God is necessary to Religion. But this is not the same as to say that no one can be religious who denies that thought. For a sentiment, a feeling, even a character may be religious without Religion, just as a tone or a concord may be musical but is not music. Far more is included in music than a musical tone; in like manner far more is embraced in Religion than a religious sentiment or tone of mind. When it is said that the thought of God is necessary to Religion, it is meant, not that there can be naught religious without that thought or name, but that Religion in its completeness comes to that thought, and that Religion must be defined by all it comes to, not by any partial manifestation of it on its way to its full and perfect nature. This truth was set forth by David Wasson twenty years ago in a manner all satisfying to my reason, in a notable discussion at that time. He was examining a definition of Religion then offered, namely that "Religion is man's effort to perfect himself." I will take here the substance and general expression of his argument. Religion he says, is compatible with unbelief in God only as the raising of wheat is compatible with bad weather or as life in a human body is compatible with having no legs. But no infer-

ence can be made from such compatibility to the true nature of Religion; for can we say that wheat involves bad weather or is indifferent to good weather, or that legs appertain not naturally to the human form and should not be a part of the definition of it? It is true that some religious men have not attributed to Religion this significance—the thought of God. That is, some men have been religious without avowed belief in God or even with avowed unbelief. But this fact could show that the thought of God is not needful to a right definition of Religion only if it were shown *that a moving principle in man never fails to report its full significance in the opinion of all who are moved by it*. But this is not the fact and can not be shown; and Ethics as well as Religion affords illustration. The moral sentiment has been explained as mere self-interest, as the factitious effect of education, and in many other ways. What now if we should reason that the moral sentiment *can not* signify anything more than self-interest since there are men of moral behavior and moved by right attractions who have thought there is nothing in human nature superior to self-interest? It is not sound thinking to define *by the inferior limit*, that is, the least that a given kind of thing can be; but rather *by the superior limit*, that is, the utmost that it tends to, comes to, and includes. Definition by the inferior limit, indeed, is no definition, but merely a classification. Man is a vertebrate animal; but to say this is not to give an account of man, but simply to classify him. It is to say what he is in common with a fish, not what he is *as man*. As man he must be defined by the superior limit, the utmost he can come to. So with Religion. It is defined to my mind and desire by what it may become at the top. I study it to learn what it is in its widest embrace of ideas, in its richest content. This gives me its true nature. And therein I find, present, constant, essential, the thought of God. Such is the argument of Wasson. (See “The Radical,” May, 1870.) In accordance with it, I have been careful not to say in the sermon that my description of Religion is a definition or complete account of it, or even a statement of its highest idea; but only that Religion is *at least* so much as I have described it to be. And this I have done with two motives—to show that even in so much of its content it is a different thing from Ethics; and to say that Religion is so much

a state of the heart that a man may be religious who is far from avowing the highest idea embraced by the perfect and true nature of Religion, nay, even more religious than one who avows that highest idea with his mouth "but his heart is far from it."

